

Fast-food experts analyze 5,427 kids' meals -- only 33 are healthful



By Karen Kaplan

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It's not often that the so-called food cops have kind words for the fast-food industry, but there are a few of them in a new report on the offerings from restaurants such as McDonald's, KFC and Taco Bell -- and how they are marketed to kids.

Analysts from the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity – a leading proponent of efforts to remove [sugary drinks](#) from schools and impose a [sin tax on sodas](#), among other initiatives – analyzed the menu offerings from 18 fast-food chains. They considered all the possible combinations of main dishes, sides and drinks – for a total of 5,427 possible meals.

Eleven out of 12 of the restaurants with kids' meals had at least one option for a side dish that the Rudd Center considered “healthy,” such as sliced apples, bananas, fruit cups, applesauce, green beans, corn or salads (yes, there are [three types of salads](#) for kids at Panera Bread). In addition, more than three-quarters of the restaurants offered a healthy drink choice, usually unflavored milk, 100% juice or bottled water.

McDonald's got a special shout-out for changing its Happy Meal menu to include only a half-serving of French fries and adding sliced apples. And Subway, Burger King, Taco Bell, Arby's and Jack in the Box were commended for having main

dish items that didn't go overboard on calories, saturated fat or sodium.

Fast-food restaurants cut back on commercials aimed at younger children between the ages of 6 and 11, but boosted the number of ads aimed at teens. However, these ads increasingly featured healthful food items. The Yale team documented a 16% decline in the average calories per commercial, along with reductions in sugar and saturated fat.

That's about where the praise ended. Among the 5,427 possible meals that could be served to children, only 33 met the [recommended nutrition guidelines](#) set by the Institute of Medicine. We'll save you the trouble of doing the math – that works out to less than 1% of offerings.

The restaurant and food industries have come up with their own standards of "healthier" foods that should be marketed and served to kids. These include the National Restaurant Assn.'s [Kids LiveWell Program](#) and the [Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative](#), two voluntary programs that set limits on calories, fat, sodium and sugar (among other criteria) in products aimed at younger eaters. When the Rudd Center analysts measured the 5,427 possible meals against these standards, only 3% measured up, according to the report, [Fast Food FACTS 2013](#). (FACTS is an acronym for Food Advertising to Children and Teens Score.)

Report authors noted that since the last Fast Food FACTS came out in 2010, menu offerings have greatly expanded. As a result, the number of possible kids' meal combinations has grown by 54%. But the proportion of meals that qualify as healthful remained in the low single-digits.

Things look somewhat better for teens, who normally order off the regular menu. The proportion of options considered healthful for them was closer to 25%, according to the report.

Why focus so much on fast food? The report notes that one-third of children and 41% of teens [eat fast food every day](#), according to a 2012 study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine by researchers from the University of Illinois at Chicago. And on days that do include a fast-food meal, the [daily caloric intake rises](#) by 126 for children and by 310 for teens, some of the same researchers reported this year in JAMA Pediatrics.

Still, eating out – even at fast-food restaurants – is a fact of life for many parents. For guidance on how to maximize nutrition and minimize calories at the 18 restaurants in the study, check some of the links on [this Fast Food FACTS site](#). (In case you were wondering, the top-rated meal was Kraft mac n cheese, apples

and water, served at Arby's.)

The complete list of fast-food chains included Arby's, Burger King, Chick-fil-A, Cici's Pizza, Dairy Queen, Domino's, Dunkin' Donuts, Jack in the Box, KFC, Little Caesars, McDonald's, Panera Bread, Pizza Hut, Sonic, Starbucks, Subway, Taco Bell and Wendy's.

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